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ABSTRACT

Very little attention has been given in Canadian education to "second chance" education to enable people to return to school to complete their educations. Education is a responsibility of the provincial governments in Canada; there is no Federal Government or unit specifically dealing with education. Although policy can vary greatly among the provinces, the overall emphasis has been on retaining students in school, combating the dropout problem, and encouraging dropouts to return to traditional schooling. Current efforts are limited by the following parameters: (1) little evidence about the effectiveness of school completion programs; (2) a simplistic faith in school completion as the road to success; and (3) a belief that sequential schooling is the most efficient route for all students. Effective second chance education systems will make it easier for nontraditional students to leave formal schooling and to resume education as adults. The following approaches are highlighted: (1) using multiple programs; (2) reducing or eliminating academic prerequisites for study; (3) recognizing interests and experiences; and (4) allowing multiple routes to credentials or alternative credentials. To date, little has been done in comparison with what could be done to allow true second chances at education in Canada. A 35-item list of references is included. (SLD)

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SECOND CHANCE MEASURES IN CANADIAN EDUCATION

Paper Presented to the American Educational Research Association

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I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Donald Grant in the preparation of this paper. I also want to recognize the influence of Dr. Donald Unruh on the development of many of my ideas about accessibility and opportunity in education.

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SECOND CHANCE MEASURES IN CANADIAN EDUCATION

Introduction

The title of this paper as printed in the AERA Program has the adjective 'new' modifying the term 'second chance measures'. But it seems to me that there is very little new in regard to second chance measures in Canadian education, particularly in the elementary and secondary systems. I make this claim with the reservation due to any individual's attempt to sum up the activity in the education system of an entire country, especially one as far flung as Canada, where we typically know more about what is happening in education in the United States than we do about other parts of our own country. In fact, the domination of our thinking about education by issues, models, and events imported from our southern neighbours is an important facet of the topic of this paper.

I want to do several things in the paper. First, I will outline briefly some of the main features of current second chance efforts in Canadian education, directed primarily towards reducing the numbers of dropouts. I will draw attention to the limits and problems of these efforts. I will advocate some alternative approaches to the provision of second chance, based primarily on models from outside the formal K-12 system - that is, in post-secondary, adult, and workplace education. And I will conclude with some pessimistic reflections on barriers to change, and on the likelihood of these alternatives assuming a prominent place in educational provision.

Canadian Education

At the outset it is necessary to make a few introductory comments about the structure of education in Canada. Education is a responsibility of provincial governments in Canada, and one which they have jealously guarded. Indeed, Canada appears to be the only developed country in the world with no federal government department or unit specifically dealing with education. While our federal government does play a major role in education in a number of ways, such as providing funds to provinces, funding particular program areas, supporting general academic research, and providing education for aboriginal people, these responsibilities are divided among many federal departments. Moreover, the current federal government has been reducing or withdrawing entirely from many of its commitments in these areas.

Education systems can vary in some important respects between provinces. For example, high school encompasses grade 12 in most provinces, but has included grade 13 in Ontario, and ends at grade 11 in Quebec. Similarly, local governance and financing provisions vary quite considerably, although interdistrict funding disparities are much smaller in Canada than in the US. Some provinces fund several systems of education based on religious divisions, and some provide substantial support for private schools. We have no national educational research effort, and only a few of the provinces support or conduct significant

research. Thus I am glossing over many differences in talking about Canada as a whole.

Canadian Approaches to Second Chance

All policy is shaped by a particular formulation of a problem. The nature of a response is essentially directed by the way in which the problem has been formulated. This symposium draws upon the intellectual efforts of Dan Inbar and of various other colleagues who have developed and written about the concept of second chance (e.g. Inbar 1989; 1990).

In Canada the concept of second chance is not widely used; only one document reviewed for this paper used the term (Lawton, Leithwood, Baicher, Donaldson & Stewart, 1988). Instead, in the secondary schools discussion has focused around problems phrased in terms of dropouts, retention, and graduation rates. That is, our policy debate in this area is much more affected by the US focus on high school completion than it is by the concept of second chance.

Since the question of second chance in Canada has largely been conceived in the formal system as an issue of dropouts, it is useful to ask how serious the dropout problem is. As in other countries, accurate data are not available, in itself an interesting element of our approach to the issue. A recently-released, two year review of high school programs in my own province of Manitoba collected no data at all about dropouts (Manitoba, 1988)! The best available evidence comes from studies done in Ontario (Radwanski, 1987; Lawton et al, 1988). These show that, as in the US, about 30% of any given cohort leaves the schools before completing grade 12. The federal government Initiative document cited Statistics Canada estimates of about 35% as the overall national dropout rate (Canada, 1990).

These numbers do not appear to have changed significantly in some time. High school completion rates in Canada rose steadily through the 1950's and 1960's, but have remained stable since then. As in the US, however, it is only in the last few years that attention has again focused on dropouts. Canadian policy has been much influenced by the American debate, even though the demographic and economic issues facing Canada are different in some important respects. For example, the matter of minority education is quite different, both in size and in scope. The US concern about a workforce which will be dominated by poorly-prepared minorities is essentially nonexistent in Canada.

Provinces have varied in the amount of attention which they have given to the issues. In 1982, the Ontario review of secondary education made no mention at all of the issue of dropouts (Ontario, 1981, 1982), but in 1986 the Province felt the need to launch a major study of the question, which became the Radwanski report. Ontario has since implemented a series of reports and policy measures to try to remedy identified problems (Lawton et al, 1988; Mackay & Miles, 1989; Ontario, 1988; Ontario, 1990; Quirouette, Saint-Denis & Huot, 1990; M. Sullivan, 1988). Indeed the Ontario government in 1987 committed itself to reducing the number of dropouts by one-third over the succeeding five years. The Royal Commission on Education in British Columbia made relatively brief mention of dropouts

in its large and very comprehensive report (B. Sullivan, 1988), and Manitoba, as mentioned, has little activity in this area. On the other hand, the Province of Saskatchewan has created a unit specifically responsible for reducing numbers of dropouts. Newfoundland issued a provincial report and has taken some program action (Newfoundland, 1989). And in 1990 the government of Canada initiated a Stay in School initiative, even though it has no constitutional role in education policy or programming.

Policy as Ideology

The particular definition of the issue has had important practical results; the language used has been reflective of the ways in which the problem has been defined and therefore addressed. For the most part, that is, the issue in Canada has been seen as one of needing to keep more students in school until they complete grade 12. Moreover, most of the documents focus on dropping out as a problem of and for students. That is, dropping out is seen to be caused by students' family background, poverty, or lack of motivation. The focus of policy-making in education, then, has been on programs to prevent students from dropping out, and to encourage drop-outs to return to school.

The language used to discuss issues of secondary school completion embodies the new right agenda of economic competitiveness. Dropouts are said to be doomed to low-wage, dead-end jobs. More dropouts means higher costs to society in the form of more crime, higher welfare and unemployment costs, and other social problems. More education is seen as necessary for economic reasons (e.g. Newfoundland, 1989, p. 1). The letter from the federal Minister of Employment and Immigration which introduced the "Stay In School Initiative" talked about "educated, well trained people in large numbers" as "indispensable to the productivity gains that our industry must achieve to survive and thrive in a highly competitive world". "The fundamental purpose of this federal initiative", the document goes on to say, "is to respond to the serious threat that the secondary school dropout rate poses to the future productivity of the Canadian economy" (Canada, 1990). The language of the entire document focuses on the economic costs and benefits of education. Other reports are quite similar. For example, the Sullivan Commission in British Columbia spoke of a high dropout rate as "a loss which an economy that is increasingly based on knowledge and expertise can ill afford" (1988, p. 92).

Essentially absent from the discussion are human considerations - the frustration and despair of students who see no future for themselves in our schools or our labour market. Also absent is any reference to equity issues. There is no mention of the cleavages created in a society in which some have so much, and others so little (Greene, 1990). There is no mention of the link between social class and educational attainment, even though this connection is firmly established in Canadian research (Radwanski, 1987). If anything, Canadian post-secondary education is even more stratified than is that in the United States (Levin, 1989). Although the federal government Stay-in-School document notes that dropout rates among native students are as high as 70%, it says nothing about the reasons for this situation, and proposes one program (worth \$2 million out of the program's total

budget of \$300 million over five years) aimed at the situation of native young people.

The activities which are taking place in Canada are just about what one might expect given their origins. Much stress is placed on publicity, and on special school programs for so-called at-risk students. There is a lesser attempt to provide reentry programs for adults who wish to return and complete secondary schooling. And there is very little attempt to change the schools in significant ways, or to create anything which might be seen genuinely as a second chance system. And it appears that Canada is at the forefront of efforts by OECD countries to deal with problems of educational failure (W. Oehler, personal communication, Feb. 21, 1991).

The federal government initiative involves three components; a series of pilot projects on services focused heavily on improved counselling services and work experience programs; funds to support the development of partnerships among schools, businesses, and non-profit organizations; and a national information program to "raise public awareness of the dropout problem and encourage youth to stay in school...focusing on *realistic* career options" [emphasis added] (Canada, 1990).

The focus has been quite similar at other levels as well. The emphasis has been on providing alternative curricula or programs, on expanding guidance and counselling services, and on special or pilot programs developed locally for particular kinds of students. (My thanks to graduate student Donald Grant, who gathered much of the information summarized in the next few paragraphs.) For example, the Newfoundland government policy document stresses the importance of schools' taking action to prevent dropouts, but provides few specific suggestions beyond clear attendance policies and attempting "any means possible to remediate students' academic deficiencies" (1990, p. 12). Newfoundland, with the financial support of the federal government, promoted the formation of school district retention committees, sponsored a "student Retention Conference, ran radio and TV advertisements, and funded local projects. Ontario has published two documents listing more than 100 different programs around the province (Ontario 1988, 1990).

The variety of local programs and projects across Canada is in some senses considerable. Setting and content have been altered substantially from regular school programs. Efforts to reduce the number of dropouts range from storefront schools to co-operative or work education, to distance education, to mentoring, to support for student mothers. At a more fundamental level, almost all the programs share some important similarities. They are more of, or a slight variation on, what the schools normally do. King et al (1988), studying dropout prevention programs in Ontario, noted that "there was little change in the substance of courses and programs being offered" (p. 8). Programs emphasize so-called life-skills programs, more counselling services, and lower pupil-teacher ratios. A few programs attempt to work with other social or employment agencies, but most are stand-alone within the school. Even fewer programs have a substantial emphasis on contact with parents and families; typically the individual student is seen as the locus of intervention. There is a complete absence of programming which would use a Freirian, political consciousness-raising

approach. None of the programs appeared to deal with the issue of the students' place in the community, labour force, or economy. As well, programs share a common presumption that the school should respond by targeting particular programs to students who are seen to be at-risk, and that the goal should be to have students complete secondary school. Many of the programs have as a goal the reentry of the student into the normal secondary school program.

There are some exceptions. A small, rural school district in Manitoba, for example, has mounted major efforts to bring adults into its schools, to provide a variety of post-secondary level training programs for its communities, and to develop a focus which suggests that it is perfectly reasonable for people of all ages to begin educational programs, or to interrupt them for any number of reasons. However, this effort must be financed from external sources, and not from the regular school budget. A district in Ontario, through its adult education unit, has an agreement with some manufacturing companies to deliver programs in the factories outside of normal working hours, and to give "maturity equivalency credits" (Ontario, 1988, p.35). But the very fact that these efforts are so unusual speaks to the limited and standardized nature of the response in most jurisdictions.

Limits of Current Efforts

There are several major problems with our current efforts, ranging from the practical to the ideological. For one thing, we do not have very much evidence about the effectiveness of our programmatic efforts. Although many program models have been tried, at an aggregate level there appears to be little difference in numbers of dropouts. Mann has noted that "Despite the amazing array of things that have been and are being tried, no one should talk about solutions" (Mann, 1986, p. 7).

More importantly, our strategies rest on a simplistic and often inaccurate concept of dropping out, and a naive faith in schooling as the way to success. A very different picture comes if one ceases to view dropping out as a mistake by students caused by deficiencies in their background. The literature indicates clearly that, for many students, leaving school is a perfectly rational thing to do (Connell et al, 1982). For example, dropping out appears to be related to opportunities for employment and prevailing wages in a particular area (Bickel & Papagiannis, 1988). The influence of social class is particularly important in shaping students' perceptions about these factors (Gaskell & Lazerson, 1980). Where more schooling is unlikely to lead to better employment (for example, on aboriginal reserves with 80% or 90% unemployment), students deduce correctly that more schooling is not a good investment. Indeed, the consensus of researchers is that dropouts often do weigh the pros and cons quite carefully before leaving (Levin, 1990). Moreover, Ontario data indicate that while dropouts lag behind graduates in employment and earnings, the gap is not as great as is often imagined (M. Sullivan, 1988).

Nor is sequential study necessarily an efficient route, even for students who are successful within our schools. The literature on the school-to-work transition indicates that many,

many students change their minds about their intentions. After all, how many of us knew clearly at 16 or 17 what we wanted to make of our lives (Levin, 1985b; Alexander & Cook, 1979)? (Indeed, how many of us have even now answered that question once and for all?) Large numbers of students enter post-secondary education, but do not complete their initial programs. Large numbers of students take college preparation programs but do not go on, at least immediately. Large numbers of students enter post-secondary education without the normal requirements, or having obtained them through means other than sequential high school completion. While many dropouts have relatively poor academic performance, a significant number have achievement levels which are quite satisfactory (Radwanski, 1987; M. Sullivan, 1988). We are deluding ourselves if we think that the existing system works well for most students, with only a few requiring either preventive action or re-entry programs. If one student in three does not finish high school with her or his peers, and assuming that at least some "at risk" students do NOT drop out, then the "at risk" population must be close to half the total high school student population (Radwanski, 1987). Does it make sense to talk about an at risk group which is half of the total student body? Perhaps it is more fruitful to talk about the issue of dropouts as a matter of the total activity of the educational system, and its importance to and impact on all students.

Many commentators have noted the role of the school in creating dropouts (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; Leithwood, Lawton & Cousins, 1989). Schools actively encourage some students to leave, and do very little to discourage others (Radwanski, 1987). Several reports have drawn attention to the perverse relationship between grades, tracking, and dropping out, in which students who are least committed to schooling are given the lowest grades, placed in the least interesting programs, subjected to the most severe restrictions, and given credits which are widely regarded, by them and others, as being of little value (Lawton et al, 1988).

Indeed, as many analysts have noted, schooling is a system which is built on failure. I find quite compelling the neo-Marxist or critical theorist view of schooling as a system which is substantially designed to create or perpetuate inequality. One must ask whether schools as institutions can foster or even tolerate universal success. The conservative Canadian theorist Mark Holmes has, in his usual direct fashion, drawn attention to the important selective or sorting function of schools (Holmes, 1985). As Mary Haywood Metz has put it,

Imagine what would happen if...the goal that educators and reformers officially seek were actually accomplished. All students would become top performers. All of them would make...perfect A records throughout their schooling. Chaos would ensue. Colleges would not have room for all, but would have little ground on which to accept some and reject others. Employers...would have jobs unfilled as every student considered [some kinds of] work beneath his or her dignity.

As long as education is used to rank young people and sort them into occupational futures...students' success at education

must remain a scarce commodity. (Metz, 1990, p. 85)

Dan Inbar has made essentially the same point (1990, p. 13). If this is the case, then the effort to keep almost all students in school, and to have almost all of them succeed in school, cannot possibly work, since they run directly counter to the sorting and evaluation requirement of schools (King et al, 1988).

The alternative is a 'second chance' approach to educational attainment, in which much more emphasis would be given to alternative routes for people to improve their formal education, regardless of how, when, or why they left the schools. Indeed, we might well want to stop trying to keep students in school, and work towards a system which made it much easier for people to leave, but also much easier for them to resume their education. This would be true 'second chance' - or even third or fourth chance. We need, however, to keep in mind Inbar's finding that many second chance programs are ceremonial in nature - designed to show that the system need not change rather than designed to provide true second chances.

Promising Models

We do have some promising models as to how we might approach second chance if we took the ideas seriously. Many of these are drawn from outside the K-12 system; from post-secondary institutions, adult education, and non-formal education models. The latter two, in particular, tend to have an orientation much closer to the second chance approach than do our formal institutions at any level. My province, Manitoba, has some excellent examples involving education and training for immigrants and natives in the north and in the core area of Winnipeg.

I cannot in this paper provide any complete description of these models. I have written about some of them elsewhere (Unruh & Levin, 1990; Levin, 1989). They spring from much broader conceptions of the nature of learning than dominate our traditional institutions (Krechevsky & Gardner, 1990). I do want to mention some of the program features which seem to me to be most promising. Though separated for purposes of presentation, the four points which follow are part of a single approach, and are interdependent. They share many similarities with (though they were developed separately from) suggestions made by House and Howe (1990).

1. Multiple programs. The most important feature, it seems to me, of any second chance effort is the necessity of having many ways to get to a goal. I have already asked why anyone would assume that the public school would or could be suitable for all students. Why not, then, have many other routes to the achievement of various credentials? The development of magnet schools or alternative programs is but a tiny step in the direction of what might be done. Education in the workplace, work-study programs, apprenticeship models, self-study, and community education are all promising routes for providing education to people in a setting which is meaningful to them, yet they are all substantially

absent from the public school systems in Canada. Where they do exist, they are often seen as an inferior model for those who can't make it in "Real School", even though outcomes of the conventional system are not closely related to occupational success, income, or life satisfaction (Walberg & Herbig, 1990).

Also absent to any meaningful degree are partnerships of various kinds between schools and other community organizations. We know, for example, that most high school students have part-time jobs. We do not organize schooling to make it more feasible for students to work part-time. Nor do we explore possibilities for using their work site or their work experience as avenues for learning. Instead, we typically regard it as an interference with what we see as their real job - going to school and studying the conventional curriculum.

2. Reduction or elimination of academic prerequisites for study. Many successful second chance options pay little attention to the potential students' level of formal education. Rather, they assess motivation and need. If students are genuinely motivated, and if the appropriate supports are available, the evidence is that people can achieve much more than anyone expected. Mature student admissions in Canadian universities, which essentially admit any student over the age of 21, are an example of the first condition, although many of them do not provide enough support, and so have very high attrition rates. We know that even the best predictors of academic success are not particularly accurate, yet we persist in using them. Instead of concern about the skills and knowledge with which people begin, there should be a focus on the skills and knowledge which they have when they conclude any educational program (Unruh & Levin, 1990).

3. Recognition of interest and experience. On the one hand, we could do much more to adjust our programs to those things which are of interest to our students. That is, if students need to learn mathematics because they want to become technicians, it may be preferable to teach them the mathematics they will need for that goal, and not take the position that they must have a basic grounding in all aspects of the discipline. That can come later, and will come later if the student is interested. If not, we will be wasting everyone's time trying to inflict it. On the other hand, we could do much more to recognize what students already know instead of forcing them to study it again. Although the principle of test first, teach later is well established in pedagogical theory, it is no part of school organization, in which students must follow courses in sequence even if they already have the skills which are about to be imparted to them once again. We talk about lifelong learning, but behave as if real learning could only occur in a classroom in an accredited institution. Our educational institutions pay lip service to granting credit for prior knowledge or experience, but in practice they resent doing it, and tend to discourage it.

4. Multiple routes to credentials or alternative credentials. A large part of the power of educational institutions lies in their control of credentials. Students enter and stay in school or university in part because they need the certification to pursue a desired path. Implicit in the idea of second chance, however, is the existence of alternative routes to certification, or of alternative forms of certification. If we took seriously the earlier point about exit

competencies instead of entrance requirements, a logical implication would be provision to gain certification through demonstrated competence, however obtained. At least some students might be able to gain skills through self-study, or other private arrangements. Such skills should be eligible for recognition and certification, regardless of how or where they were obtained. We need the equivalent of anti-trust action against educational institutions so that they surrender their monopoly on certification.

Barriers to Change

None of these suggestions are particularly new. There are programs which embody these approaches in many jurisdictions, including my own province of Manitoba. We have provided all sorts of training, including university degrees in advanced fields - including Law, Medicine, and Engineering - to people with grade 10 education or less. We have provided recognized credentials to people whose training was provided through non-institutional, community-based programs. We have reshaped curricula to begin with students' immediate needs while allowing a broader study if students so desire.

These efforts have been effective where made, yet have not won widespread support. Put another way, individualization and flexibility are being called for. Ironically, these principles would appear in some form in the goal statements of practically every school system on the continent. How remarkable, then, to identify them as the missing element of effective second chance education, rarely found in our educational institutions!

Why should the gap between rhetoric and practice be so wide? After all, there is nothing inevitable about the current direction of education policy in Canada. Education systems have a number of vehicles available to them as ways of affecting education policy (Levin, 1985a; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). These include funding, support services, legal mandates through legislation or regulation, and pressure through information dissemination or opinion mobilization. All of these provide promising means of promoting greater attention to second chance education. All could be used to work towards a more important second chance capacity in education.

But the barriers and difficulties are real and significant. At the most immediate level, there is a political assault on equity in Canada. Despite the rhetoric of attention to dropouts, the current educational policy agenda in Canada, as in the U.S., is taking us in the opposite direction. The federal government, which used to cost-share many of the most successful Canadian programs, has withdrawn entirely from many of them, and has dramatically cut its financial commitment in other areas. While the Stay-in-School initiative provides \$300 million over five years, the federal government has cut \$800 million from its annual support for training, has cut billions from its contributions to provinces for post-secondary education, has slashed support for language training for immigrants, and has withdrawn from many shared-cost programs which provided second chance mechanisms.

The assault on opportunity is not simply a matter of money, either. The increasing emphasis

on so-called standards, the return to or strengthening of provincial examinations in several provinces, and the tightening of core requirements for high school graduation are all part of the same educational agenda - one which is essentially uninterested in providing opportunities for people except insofar as those people are seen as necessary for economic growth. Despite the sorts of changes in the workplace requiring greater cooperation and more independent judgment, such as those described by Henry Levin (Levin, 1991), the educational policy agenda seems to focus more and more on a system which will serve those already at the top.

Yet overt political action is only part of the picture, and in some ways is the easiest part with which to grapple. Institutional inertia, protection of mandates, problems of provider capture, lack of imagination or of will are all part of the problem. The most serious barriers are rooted in our basic ideas about the provision of education. The claims of the existing system to an exclusive legitimacy are very strong. The policy shifts just noted often have a high degree of public support because giving people more chances has been portrayed as being an attack on standards or quality (Levin, 1989). We are largely unable to think of solutions in terms which are very different from the ways in which we presently organize and conduct education, shackled by the iron hold which conventional thinking has on us.

In my previous job, which involved dealing with universities on behalf of an arms-length commission of the provincial government, our organization created a fund to support efforts by universities to expand accessibility by changing their basic services to make them available and meaningful to a wider range of students. We specifically prohibited the funding of add-on programs, and insisted on changes to general programs or services, whether curricular, teaching, or support. We had in mind several possibilities - changes in admission requirements to allow a wider range of students to enter programs; changes in curricula to recognize the background and interests of a more diverse group of students; changes in teaching methods to be more responsive to various minority groups; changes in support services so that more students could be successful in their programs of study; and professional development for staff to orient them towards a standard of success, instead of the bizarre notion, so common in education, that many failures are an indication of quality.

We received very few proposals from universities, and almost none that met the terms of the fund. Instead, we got proposals for special programs for this group or that group, or for recruiters to bring more women or natives into the university (but with no provision for changes in programs or services to help keep them there), or for physical changes such as wheelchair ramps. The general mindset in the institutions was so far from the ideas which lay behind the fund that it has taken two years of work to develop proposals which begin to address the real barriers to success.

Nor is this example unique. Secondary schools have been failing for many years to increase the proportion of graduates, yet the program proposals described earlier follow the same models which have already been tried without much success. The abysmal failure of Canadian schools to provide effective education for Native students has had very little

impact on the programs which those students continue to receive (at least outside of schools controlled by aboriginal peoples themselves).

It is distressing to see how little we do compared with how much we could do. We know more and more about ways of fostering achievement, yet seem generally unprepared to act on our knowledge. I find myself increasingly pessimistic about the ability or desire of our educational institutions to do what must be done, and therefore increasingly pessimistic about their future.

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